

A NEZ PERCE EPISODE.

ONE evening in the summer of 18— I camped at Colonel Craig's* ranch, on the Nez Perce reservation. The kind old man, after looking at my jaded animals, asked me to remain with him for a week and recruit my stock. The bunch grass was waving knee high on every hill and the pretty valley of the Sweetwater was lovely in its wealth of verdure. My horses were turned out to be herded by the Indians and I was, by virtue of the social standing of my host, tendered the freedom of the land of the red men.

The Nez Perce tribe at that time was a strong nation and their long pursued peace-policy in relation to the white men was universally extolled. Their smoke-stained tents of pyramid shape fairly dotted every smiling glade between the grass covered hills and the rippling creek that zigzags through the narrow valley. The willows waved in refreshing breezes and the stately cottonwood trees shaded the lawns about the lodges where the rollicking children played horse and bear and wolf like white boys and their idle parents watched with pride their antics like white men and women.

A favorite saddle horse which had served me faithfully on my journeys was looked upon covetously by the observing young vaqueros. Every proposition to trade other horses for my good Banquo was refused. I had been offered, before the end of the week, as many as six good Indian horses for the one. I firmly refused to part with my favorite saddle horse. From that moment I had enemies among the peaceable Nez Percés whom I avoided, for I believed the offense of refusing to trade horses with them was regarded as one to be resented. However, my time to depart had arrived. I so informed the good hearted colonel, and he forthwith ordered the Indian herders to bring in my horses. After an hour a long line of dust far up the mountain informed us that the herd was on the way to the corrals. They came at full run down the steep, rocky hill with a rush as irresistible as an avalanche. They spread out over the narrow valley and whirled about like an eddy in a swollen torrent. A thousand head of wild horses were surging back and forth, trying to escape the vigilant herders, who sat like centaurs upon bare-backed, foaming, gnashing,

eager horses. The horses and riders were white with foaming sweat tossed about by fretful heads. The dexterous reinmen fairly lifted their hurrying horses from side to side, swinging their riatas at the same time, so that they moved the surging mass with complete control toward a narrowing alley between hedges of wild thorns and willows. They passed into a thicket of tangled briars, and the thunder of many hoofs was heard no more. The herd was in a corral securely enclosed by woven brush and briars. They could stampede and surge against the hedge fence, but all their wild fury could not break it down.

One by one five of my gentle horses were led out, but Banquo, my favorite, was not forthcoming. I observed some confusion among the little knot of Indians gathered at the corral, but still suspected no treachery, as my friend Craig had restored my confidence in the queer people he knew so well. Young Joe Craig, a burly half breed, stood by my side and he, having noticed the absence of the favorite steed, demanded an explanation from one of the frowning herders. Immediately a terrible rage possessed the young son of the good colonel. After he realized that I did not know the nature of the embarrassment he explained that the Indian had told him in his native language that my horse was missing and most probably stolen. After it was established that such was the case, I was compelled to remain to give time for the thief to be captured and the horse returned. It devolved upon young Craig to play the part of the detective. He possessed enough of the Indian characteristics to make him a veritable sleuth hound. At the end of three days Banquo was returned to me. He was lame and I could not proceed on my way. I questioned the successful trailer about the incidents attending the recovery of the horse. He simply told me that he had run the thief down and brought back the horse. Even when questioned about the treatment of the offender he simply informed me that my horses were safe thereafter on the Nez Perce reservation so far as Indian thieves were concerned, implying that I should accept that fact without enquiring into details.

Two days after the return of the stolen horse young Joe Craig was arrested. A sheriff's posse came to the house disguised as prospectors and engaged the young man to act as interpreter. They pretended to be in need of a horse and wanted the accommodating half breed to assist in buying one from the Indians. The young man went along and was soon in irons on his way to jail. One of the officers told me the charge was murder.

A few minutes after the departure of the officers and their prisoner mounted messengers rode the length of that pretty valley, and the idle, peaceful red men of an hour before were in war paint. Colonel Craig, bent

* Colonel William Craig was an American trapper of the early times, who was so pleased with this region that he settled among the Nez Percés in 1840, where he was living at the time of the Whitman massacre, in 1848, his influence being most valuable at that crisis, as it was during the great war of 1855 and 1856, when the Nez Percés not only remained the firm friends of the whites but aided them materially. In the summer campaign of 1858 Colonel Craig joined the volunteers with a company of sixty Nez Percés, led by Spotted Eagle, and was chosen Lieutenant Colonel of the regiment commanded by Colonel B. F. Shaw. He was Indian agent for many years at the Lapwai agency.—ED.